THE ETHICAL SOCIETIES

Ethical societies were groups of people who came together to try to live good lives, without the need for religious or supernatural beliefs. They focused on living morally, sharing fellowship with other people, and working to bring about social change that would benefit the wider community – holding meetings, lectures, and social events.

These societies were the forerunners of today's humanist groups, for example the **Union of Ethical Societies** – formed in 1896 – is today called Humanists UK.

ETHICAL CULTURE

The ethical societies in the UK were inspired by the Ethical Culture movement in America. In 1876, a man called **Felix Adler** (the son of a rabbi) had founded the New York Society for Ethical Culture with the motto 'Not by the Creed but by the Deed' – meaning that how people acted was more important than what they claimed to believe.

A creed is a formal statement of belief, usually religious, and Felix Adler wanted to show that people didn't need to agree on everything – or be told what to think – to be able to join together and do good.

One person inspired by Felix Adler was another American, **Stanton Coit**, who helped to spread the ideas of ethical culture in the UK.

The first ethical society in the UK was the London Ethical Society, founded in 1886. Over the years to come, many more ethical societies would be formed all over the UK – including in Northern Ireland, Wales, and Scotland. Ten years after the first society was founded, in 1896, a collection of these ethical societies came together to form the **Union of Ethical Societies**.

Over 70 individual ethical societies were involved with the Union during its history. Later, this organisation would become the British Humanist Association, and today it is known as **Humanists UK**.

AROUND THE WORLD

This ethical movement didn't just take place in the US and UK. There were ethical societies around the world, including in Europe, New Zealand, and Japan. In 1896, the International Ethical Union was formed, uniting many of these groups, and holding its first congress that year in Zurich, Switzerland. This was the precursor of what is today known as **Humanists International** (founded in 1952 as the International Humanist and Ethical Union).

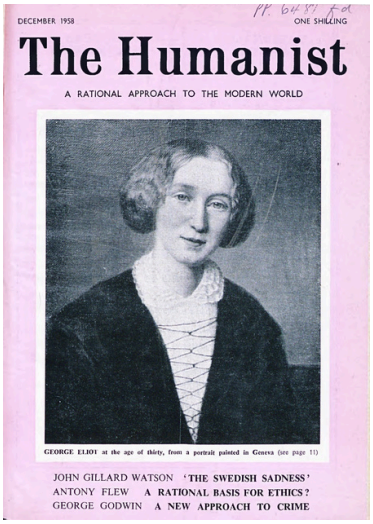
'Concord among races and peoples'. The symbol of the Universal Races Congress, designed by Walter Crane

Many individual members of the ethical societies were actively involved in trying to make the world a better, fairer place. Felix Adler campaigned against child labour, and Stanton Coit worked to improve the lives of people in poverty. **Zona Vallance** – who was the first secretary of the Union of Ethical Societies – fought for women to have equal rights to men, including the right of women to vote.

The Ethical Societies were also responsible for major efforts to foster understanding between different countries, improve education in schools, and change laws they thought were cruel or unjust. In 1911, the International Ethical Union were behind the organisation of the **First Universal Races Congress**, a pioneering conference bringing together people from all over the world to challenge racist ideas and improve relationships.

BECOMING HUMANISTS UK

The beliefs of the ethical societies were humanist: they believed that it wasn't necessary to believe in a god to live a good and moral life, and that we could use other things – like science and empathy – to figure out what to believe, and what was right and wrong. The Union of Ethical Societies became the Ethical Union, then the British Humanist Association, and finally **Humanists UK**, but these core values have always stayed the same.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The Humanist

A RATIONAL APPROACH TO THE MODERN WORLD

GEORGE ELIOT at the age of thirty, from a portrait painted in Geneva (see page 11)

JOHN GILLARD WATSON 'THE SWEDISH SADNESS'
ANTONY FLEW A RATIONAL BASIS FOR ETHICS?
GEORGE GODWIN A NEW APPROACH TO CRIME

The word ‘humanist’ is hundreds of years old, but it was only from around the 1940s that ethical societies began to use it to describe themselves. To them, it captured their belief in the possibilities and responsibilities of human beings. In 1956, when the magazine of the movement renamed itself *The Humanist*, scientist and humanist Julian Huxley celebrated the way this word gave ‘importance to all essential human attributes and values — morality as well as science, art as well as reason.’

Drawing of Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London by architect Frank Herbert Mansford, c. 1926.

CONWAY HALL ETHICAL SOCIETY

Today, there is only one remaining ethical society in the UK: Conway Hall Ethical Society. Once the South Place Ethical Society, it was renamed to honour the London home built especially for the society in 1929, itself named for the freethinker and abolitionist Moncure Conway. Its library is the largest and most comprehensive humanist research resource of its kind in the UK.

To learn more about Conway Hall Ethical Society, visit the virtual tour of Conway Hall at understandinghumanism.org.uk/conway-hall-virtual-tour

QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to be ‘ethical’ or to live ‘ethically’?
2. How might coming together in a group help people to live good lives?
3. How were the beliefs and activities of the ethical societies similar to, or different from, those of churches and religious groups?

Humanist Heritage

Understanding Humanism

heritage.humanists.uk
understandinghumanism.org.uk